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Deposited in DRO:

05 November 2019

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Smith, A. and McBride, J. (2019) 'Accessing 'hard to reach groups' and emotions in the research process : 'work an honest day and get the usual raw deal'.', in Handbook of research methods on the quality of working lives. , pp. 95-108. Handbooks of research methods in management.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788118774.00013>

Publisher's copyright statement:

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CHAPTER 7

Accessing ‘Hard to Reach Groups’ and Emotions in the Research Process:

‘Work an Honest Day and Get the Usual Raw Deal’

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SUMMARY

This chapter is based on detailed qualitative research into the working lives of low-paid workers in multiple employment. We discuss the research design and practicalities of researching a ‘hard to reach group’ of workers. The emotive and sensitive issues that emerged for both the researchers and participants are also assessed.

INTRODUCTION

There is growing interest in issues of low-pay, insecure work and job quality from academics, policy-makers, employers and trade unions. It is estimated that 5.6million workers in the UK are paid below the Foundation Living Wage (FLW), being the minimum needed by a family

or individual to ensure a socially acceptable standard of living (<https://www.livingwage.org.uk>), which is currently £8.75/hour (£10.20/hour in London) (Moore and Fiddes, 2016), meaning that many are struggling to get by. Various studies have mentioned that some workers need to have additional jobs in order to survive (see Toynbee, 2003; Garthwaite, 2016). However, this is the first ever study in the UK to focus on the working lives of low-paid workers in multiple legitimate employment.

Our qualitative research critically examines the work experiences and work-life ‘balance’ (WLB) complexities of these low-paid workers. We intended to examine these day to day realities, as the voices of low-paid workers are largely absent from current (and mostly quantitative) studies. As we are based at the Universities of Bradford and Durham, the initial plans were to focus on the regions of Yorkshire and the North-East of England and interview 50 low-paid workers in multiple employment, along with five trade union representatives and five employers/managers. In this chapter we discuss notions of job quality and how this influenced the research design. We then discuss our experience of the challenges of researching the quality of working lives. There are two important dimensions drawn out of this experience: firstly, the practicalities of researching a ‘hard to reach group’, and secondly, the recognition of discussing emotions and sensitive issues during the research process.

Job Quality and the Research Design

It is widely documented that there have been major transformations of work and employment over the last four decades. Whilst the current Conservative government laud record levels of employment in the UK, with 32.26 million people working in April 2018, being 75.4% of the population aged from 16 to 64 (Office for National Statistics, 2018), Heyes et al. (2017) argue that there is an obsession over job quantity, to the detriment of job quality. Kalleberg

(2011) identifies a precarious and polarised US labour market, with ‘good jobs’ for some and ‘bad jobs’ for others. Whilst we argue that notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ jobs are more complex and nuanced, similar trends in job quality have been identified in the UK. Green et al. (2015) argue that there is a polarisation of employment in the UK as a consequence of neo-liberalism, with many in low-paid and insecure work. This inequality has been exacerbated since the financial crisis, with a reassertion of the management prerogative (see Smith, 2016). Whilst notions of job quality are contested and debated with differences across various disciplines, some key dimensions cover: wages and monetary rewards; job prospects and security; skills; discretion and work effort (Green, 2006; Kalleberg, 2011). Work-life balance (WLB), flexibility and working time arrangements are also important aspects of job quality (Wood, 2016), and are key elements of this particular research project.

We are both experienced qualitative researchers whose research interests broadly cover the sociology of work and employment relations. Notions of job quality informed the design of this research into low-paid workers in multiple employment. In particular, we were interested in the realities of working in more than one job, the challenges around WLB and, importantly, hearing the voices of these workers. We developed a detailed interview schedule to reveal the qualitative depth and detail of daily working lives, with space for respondents to speak freely. This process involved drawing on our extensive research experience as qualitative researchers and traversing the literature on low-pay, the experiences of work, WLB and research methods. We devised several draft interview schedules and had to think carefully about workers in more than one job with multiple employers, complex working time arrangements and WLB challenges. An interview schedule was developed with questions and prompts, and the introductory questions centred on the types of jobs, contracts, terms and conditions, trade unionisation and length of service. Following this were a set of

questions on the experience of work, covering job roles, discretion, autonomy, the pace of work, job control, training and development, pay and rewards, job satisfaction and security. The third part of the schedule focused on WLB, enquiring about care responsibilities, daily strategies to manage work and life, along with organisational policies and managerial practices. The closing questions asked about future plans and what could be done to improve working lives.

The Practicalities of Researching a ‘Hard to Reach Group’

From the inception of the research project we recognised that low-paid workers in multiple employment constitute a ‘hard to reach group’. Namely that this particular population are relatively hidden (see Bonevski et al., 2014), with specific characteristics in that they are paid below the FLW and have more than one employer. Therefore, identifying, accessing and interviewing such workers was going to be problematic as it was not simply a case of negotiating research access with one employing organisation. Hence, we needed to think creatively and reach out to a number of organisations who we felt would be interested in the research project. We decided to establish an Advisory Group made up of trade union officials and representatives, community groups and poverty organisations in order to enhance interest in the project and ease research access to these workers. We were able to draw on existing contacts and also approach other organisations to join the Advisory Group by making the most of our credentials and social networks (see Valerio et al. 2016), being that we are established researchers in the subject area and we were both trade union representatives prior to entering academia. All of these various organisations felt that the research was important and timely, with potential impact on issues of low-pay, in-work poverty, trade union representation and WLB. We needed to have research access approved by some trade unions. Once access was granted we then had to develop relationships with

national officials and grassroots representatives and garner their interest, and acknowledged that access is a continually negotiated exercise. We met in person with these gatekeepers and were able to present our research plans at numerous trade union conferences and meetings in order to encourage representatives to ask for volunteers to take part in the study.

Whilst we were discussing the research with unions, we were also negotiating research access with a number of community groups and organisations concerned with low-pay and in-work poverty, and note that researching a ‘hard to reach’ population involves multiple starting points. A large number of organisations and contacts were interested in the project and helpful in attempting to facilitate research access, but other avenues proved to be less fruitful. We did draw on the Advisory Group to seek advice on how to promote the research through flyers, posters and project information sheets. Members of the Advisory Group recommended the use of straight-forward language, the removal of academic titles e.g. ‘doctor’ and, when targeting workers in a specific sector (see Kaiser et al., 2017) who were likely to have two jobs, state that our research was supported by a particular trade union.

In terms of sampling, we used both purposive and snowballing techniques (see Valerio et al., 2016). We used purposive sampling as we were targeting workers in multiple employment who were paid below the FLW. We liaised with trade unions that tend to represent low-paid workers who may be employed on part-time contracts, who could, therefore, require additional employment. Community groups and organisations concerned with alleviating poverty were also contacted to aid research access, and we also offered interviewees £20 shopping vouchers to take part in the study; a strategy also used by others, including MacDonald et al. (2013) in their research on poverty and worklessness. An unemployed centre based in the North-East distributed 1,000 project flyers with their own regular

newsletter postings. A number of unions and community organisations also sent out project flyers through their e-mail circulation lists or posted them on their Facebook pages, some of which generated several research participants, but others were dead ends. We also handed out flyers at the many union conferences and meetings that we attended. One of the authors volunteered at a local foodbank and clothing bank and distributed flyers seeking research participants. We also used a snowball sampling strategy, as other researchers have utilised when studying ‘hard to reach groups’ (see MacDonald et al., 2013; Noy, 2008). This involved interviewing low-paid workers with more than one job and asking if any of their colleagues/friends were in similar employment positions, this did prove to be beneficial. Furthermore, through our continuous snowballing strategy, we also used ‘respondent-driven recruitment’ (see Bonevski et al., 2014), whereby some participants handed out flyers in their workplaces which also helped increase the number of volunteers who took part in the research project.

Once we had workers interested in the research project, the next challenges were around scheduling and conducting the interviews. This was typically arranged and planned via e-mail or telephone conversations. We were also aware that we should not present ourselves as ‘too academic’ or ‘formal’. As we are both academics from a working class background with strong North-East accents we were able to relate to these workers and we also ‘dressed down’ for the interviews. As these workers have two or more jobs, they have very busy schedules, so we arranged the interviews at a time of their convenience. We conducted interviews in cafes, local libraries, our offices, some respondents’ homes and also in private rooms that were kindly provided by some members of the Advisory Group.

‘The Forgotten Workers’: Some Key Research Findings

Scheduling and conducting detailed qualitative research with this ‘hard to reach group’ entailed a considerable amount of time and effort. Between June 2015 and May 2017, we achieved our target of interviewing 50 low-paid workers in multiple employment in the regions of Yorkshire and the North-East. Moreover, we exceeded our initial targets and interviewed nine trade union representatives, six senior managers and also two foodbank organisers. We gathered a vast amount of qualitative data and uncovered some fascinating and unexpected research findings on contemporary issues in work and employment, particularly around well-being, in-work poverty and indignity. As this is the first ever study in the UK into low-paid multiple employment, and there appears to be no official statistics of people in more than one job, we term these ‘the forgotten workers’. They were employed in a range of jobs, incorporating cleaning, catering, the care sector, security, social services, education, retail, public services, administration and IT services. These jobs cover the private, public and third sectors, and consist of full-time, part-time (PT), agency, temporary, seasonal, casual and zero hours contracts (ZHC). The majority of the interviewees were women, with diverse ages that span the late-teens into the 60s. In terms of education, some had no qualifications, but many had employer training and vocational qualifications such as NVQs, school level qualifications such as GCSEs, ‘O’ levels and ‘A’ levels, others had university degrees and even masters’ degrees. From the outset of the research, we expected to interview workers with 2 or 3 employers, but were shocked to speak to a number with four, five, six and even seven different jobs. All clearly had a very strong work ethic, but were struggling to make ends meet; indeed, some went to foodbanks to help them get through the month.

The key research findings reveal that these workers faced a number of unique challenges in their complex working lives. They all had very ambivalent feelings about work, in that their

jobs were socially important, such as, cleaning and caring, but these jobs were low-paid and classed as 'low-skilled' Moreover, many felt appreciated and respected by colleagues, but generally were not valued by managers. Regarding dimensions of job quality, the majority had limited opportunities for training, development and progression. All faced issues around acquiring sufficient working hours to manage financially and, therefore, took on additional employment. As a consequence, their working days were long and complex, with working hours dispersed across the day and week, typically incorporating non-standard hours. There was clear evidence of work intensification due to austerity cuts and managerial demands to 'do more with less', as employers sought to drive up effort levels in the aftermath of the financial crisis (see Green et al., 2015; Smith, 2016). Many of the workers we interviewed had received a pay rise via the National Living Wage -(which is the equivalent of a statutory minimum wage, and market based, rather than a calculated 'real' living wage as in the FLW) introduced by the Conservative government in April 2016 for workers aged over 25 - only to have their working hours cut by employers, meaning that they actually ended up worse off. The majority felt that their jobs were insecure with fears of outsourcing, subcontracting and redundancy. Regarding job quality and working time flexibility (see Wood, 2016), these workers were typically excluded from organisational WLB policies and practices as they were regarded as 'peripheral' staff by managers. All of these challenging and complex issues raised a number of emotional, sensitive and well-being issues for both the interviewees and interviewers, which we address in the following section of the chapter.

Emotive and Sensitive Issues in Research

Recognition and acknowledgement of the effect of emotions in the research process is argued to be rarely addressed in methodologies (Blackman 2007, Holland 2007). This hesitancy is suggested to stem from the notion that admitting emotions might constitute a threat to

academic ‘professionalism’ (Kleinman and Copp 1993), or that emotion is deemed to be ‘epistemologically irrelevant’ (Barter and Reynold 2003); or that there is an underlying disciplinary requirement in the ethical demand that the storyteller and the narrative should be ‘clean’ (Blackman 2007). However, there are also those who argue that the ‘hidden ethnography’ of research - whereby researchers share their tales and anecdotes where emotion played a part but remains hidden - is important data as it provides an emotional reflexivity that ‘demonstrates a rigorous, responsive and systematic approach to qualitative research’ (Blackman 2007, Measham and Moore 2007).

Indeed, we found that when candidly sharing our stories of our one to one interviews, our stories did not only concern information from participants, but we also found ourselves sharing our experiences of the research process that caused distress (to both researcher and researched) and/or were difficult to handle for varying reasons. It was not until then that we realised that the ethnography surrounding the interviews was just as important as the words from the participants – this ‘hidden ethnography’ actually enriched the data of the participants’ words, contributing to a greater academic insight and understanding of their lived experiences. It should be noted that we had not intended to conduct an emotionally reflexive piece of research it was rather an ‘accidental reflexivity’.

On a final note to this topic, whilst we are not claiming to be writing a text on, for example, the ‘sociology of emotions’, we do agree that the emotive and sensitive issues that arise during the research process (for both the researcher and researched) should be discussed. We believe it is important to discuss these issues, not only because they ‘highlight limitations in the existing evidence base’ which is the purpose of this book, but also as they became a crucial element of our research process and findings.

We have been researching the world of work for over 20 years and, prior to this, both acted for workers' rights as trade union representatives. Therefore, it could be assumed that we are very practised in dealing with sensitive and emotive issues concerning work and employment. However, during the course of this fieldwork we both acknowledged that we have never, as academic researchers, experienced such emotive and sensitive interviews. As discussed above, we had a prepared list of semi-structured questions to ask workers. However, as the one to one interviews began, a number of our respondents, both male and female, broke down in tears during the discussion at different times and over different issues.

We later realised that this was a very important factor of our research process, as it made the points raised by some of our respondents more meaningful and needed to be acknowledged. Therefore, when we were analysing our data, we included a focus on the points at which respondents broke down and placed the trigger of the emotions into themes. These are discussed below, and are purposefully linked with empirical data to emphasise more clearly how and why emotions were produced.

Well-being

As a consequence of multiple jobs and elongated work schedules, we were not surprised to find many of the respondents suffering with tiredness, using phrases, such as, 'we're practically dead on our feet', 'zombified', and 'it wipes me out completely'. Many clearly stated that they were suffering from stress, some due to poor management strategies, others due to complex working hours.

It's really stressful. Your sleep cycle gets out of whack. I'm perpetually exhausted.

(John, two jobs – PT retail and PT care sector)

You're in so much momentum, you don't realise how exhausted you are. (*Phoebe, two jobs, retail*)

We came to realise that most of these people would not ordinarily discuss their work in such detail with anyone. The situation of talking openly in an independent one to one interview about the realities of their working lives and how it affected them and their home lives, we now believe may have contributed to a breakdown in emotions for many of our respondents.

It was also during these sensitive and emotive sessions that many respondents freely discussed how their situation was affecting their health; yet they continued to work in more than one job. For example, Annie is anaemic, has an overactive bladder and suffers with a bad back. She told us that she needed to work in more than one job to obtain all of her prescriptions as they are free when in receipt of tax credits. However, the multiple work was also affecting her long term depression,

R: I've suffered from depression for years.

[Respondent cries 0:45:19.8].

R: I'm alright.

I: Do you want a tissue?

R: I'm alright actually.

To pause and reflect here, on reading back this transcription, the interviewer who conducted this felt embarrassed that all that was offered was a tissue. Yet, at the time, felt helpless as to how to offer support in this situation. As academic researchers we are not trained in how to comfort participants in these situations and also how to deal with our own emotions. Indeed,

Hubbard et al. (2001) feel that there is not enough emphasis on the researcher and the emotional effect of the research process on them. Clearly at that immediate time the main concern was with the participant and their emotions and, of course, their well-being. Indeed, we had many concerns over our participants' well-being and their work.

Several interviewees claimed that their job had led to problems with their health, such as, back ache from lifting, arthritic knees from kneeling and cleaning and this was leading to anxiety about their future employment and earning. Most yearned for more stability in their lives with quotes such as *"I don't want to be working seven jobs. I just want a normal job"*, *"I would love to just finish work at the end of the day and that was it"*. Yet there were still others looking for more work and finding this process stressful,

I'd have to get up really early five days a week. To do two hours work in a morning, to then have nothing to do for the rest of the day, just waiting for a phone call (for more work). And I couldn't afford to do anything, so... I just waited for this phone call all day. I'd only get a call about once or twice a week if I were lucky. (*Jack, two jobs – ZHC care sector, PT bar work*)

It was soul-destroying. I was applying for at least ten jobs a day (*Alfie, two jobs, handyman and maintenance*)

Jack was on a zero hours contract and Alfie had been made redundant, therefore, both needed extra jobs and income. What came from these particular interviews, amongst many others, was they drew out the emotion of 'shame'.

Shame

This emotion was drawn out in many different ways. It made for unexpected and uncomfortable interviewing at times, with no awareness of how to deal with such declarations. Again, despite not being part of the interview schedule, we allowed the interviewee to continue to elaborate on these feelings. Alfie, had been made redundant from a well-paid job, had lost his car and family home due to negative equity and was renting a smaller house with two part-time low-paid jobs. He mentioned the word 'ashamed' four times during his interview, 'worthless' three times and 'embarrassed' twice. His interview was extremely emotionally intense and he broke down in tears during it. Initially, he said he felt ashamed due to losing his job,

I: But why? It's not your fault that you lost your job.

R: No, it's not my fault. But at the end of the day, it's been embedded in my brain to be the breadwinner. And to have all of that taken away from you in a flash. You just feel worthless; you just feel absolutely worthless.

He then explained how the experience of looking for work was dehumanising,

I've never felt like such an idiot in my life. I've got somebody sitting behind a desk who's younger than me, and they're saying to me, "So how come you can't get a job?" I said because they are all zero hour contracts! I said, "you don't live in the real world". If you've got children and you've got to run a family on a zero hour contract, it doesn't work.

He also told us that he had managed to get a job interview but when he turned up no-one arrived to interview him and he said, 'I honestly felt like crying, I was that ashamed.' Again, the interviewer here felt a number of emotions during this very difficult interview, such as,

frustration, anger, sympathy, hurt and an urge to help, but felt helpless. These feelings were encountered again in other interviews when people broke down in tears due to what they felt was ‘shame’. For example, Jo, a cleaner with two part-time jobs, cried when she noted that she had no qualifications and blamed herself for being a ‘naughty child’ at school, and said ,

I hate it when people ask, “What qualifications have you got?” and I say “None.”

Other feelings of shame were related to struggling financially. Not all of our respondents claimed to be ‘in poverty’ and we never directly asked anyone if they believed they were in poverty. However, some respondents defined themselves as being in poverty, with some in deep poverty (see McBride et al., 2018), but many evaded the labels of ‘poverty’ or ‘poor’ by using phrases such as:

‘I can’t afford it’, ‘...towards the end of the month, it’s desperate’, ‘we’re struggling’, ‘I’m just trying to make ends meet’, ‘You have to stretch it out’, ‘I do these two jobs to make ends meet’, ‘I work to keep my head above water’, ‘At the end of the month I’m on the bones of my arse’, ‘I have to do two jobs to survive’.

Others associated poverty with a notion of shame. For example, several people were using foodbanks to survive and did not want anyone to know that they needed this help.

I don’t go to the foodbank every week. It’s just, like, to help me out just that tiny little bit. I don’t dare tell anybody I go to the foodbank. (*Abigail, two jobs – ZHC security, PT bar work*).

Others did not own or rent a house and were ‘ashamed’ to tell their work colleagues,

If I didn’t do all these jobs I wouldn’t be able to live. I live in a caravan now. (*Anna – four jobs two x cleaner, shop worker, catering assistant*)

Some were unable to buy clothes or take their family out

That's how bad it is. Look, £10 these jeans were. That's all I've spent on myself for about nine months....and we haven't been out for something to eat for at least two or three years. We simply can't afford it - even McDonalds. (*Alfie, two jobs*)

What also became evident during the research process, is what Chase and Walker (2012) refer to as the 'co-construction of shame' (feeling shame *and* being shamed) which combines an internal judgement of one's own inabilities as well as an anticipated assessment of how one will be judged by others (p. 740). Indeed, some of our participants made this distinction, for example, Alfie was concerned about how others would perceive his redundancy status, "...just little things like seeing my in-laws - I was totally ashamed." He was also concerned about how others in the community would perceive his unemployed status,

You can imagine how embarrassing it was for me. I was going in ASDA on the weekend with the kids and there's people coming up to me, "Oh are you alright, Alfie, how are you doing? What are you doing now?" I felt so ashamed and so embarrassed and I thought, 'I haven't got a job'.

We did not anticipate finding so much hardship at the outset of this research project, and this shocked us. This raised another emotion of frustration in that, despite working extremely hard in more than one job, many of our respondents did not feel that they were valued. Here, we consider value in terms of how an individual perceives value in themselves, at work and how they are treated by others (see McBride and Martinez Lucio 2014). Once again, this was drawn out of the emotional and sensitive reflections in many interviews. James who had five jobs mentioned, "*I don't feel valued...all it takes is somebody to acknowledge the work that you do*". Anna, who had four jobs, two as a cleaner, said,

Management and other people look down on you because you are a cleaner. For some reason, cleaning is the worst job in the world and you are classed as a second-class citizen. A cleaner is like a nothing. I have learned that you are a nothing.

Some workers in retail explained how they felt undervalued by the public and, in particular, customers,

I work on the checkouts...some of the customers are disgusting the way they speak to you. Some of them talk to you like you're stuff on the bottom of their feet. I've been called everything, ginger cow, slut...sometimes you're in tears the way they speak to you. (*Annie, two pt jobs, cleaning and retail*)

DISCUSSION

There are two elements in this chapter concerning research methods on the quality of working lives. Firstly, issues in accessing a 'hard to reach' group of participants, and secondly, unease when encountering emotive and sensitive issues during the research process.

As we were seeking to interview specific workers with unique characteristics – namely, workers in multiple legitimate employment who were paid below the FLW – they constitute a 'hard to reach' group (see Bonevski et al., 2014). Accessing these workers was challenging and complex, so we drew on established networks and reached out to a range of key stakeholders by forming an Advisory Group. They were able to ease our research access and offer useful advice on our use of language and potential impact. We utilised both purposive and snowballing sampling techniques but found that accessing these workers was a time

consuming and continually negotiated process. The detailed worker interviews provided a plethora of rich detailed data, revealing sensitive and emotive issues around well-being, poverty and shame.

We concur with those who assert that when conducting in-depth research into the complex realities of peoples' working lives, you cannot 'divorce' the emotional relations that develop out of this. As Holland (2007) argues, emotions play an important part, not only in the field, but also in the research process itself. Indeed, our analysis involved various steps and refinement due to the realisation that emotions were a crucial element in helping us to deeper understand the problems that low-paid workers in multiple employment encountered in their everyday lives.

We also recognise that feelings we experienced in the interviews were sometimes difficult to handle (Hubbard et al., 2001). On reflection, we did not anticipate to uncover such sensitive, emotive and complex issues and we refer to this as 'accidental emotional reflexivity'. Significant findings concerning indignity, stress, shame and in-work poverty and involving the co-construction of shame (Chase and Walker, 2012) were uncomfortable and challenging issues for both the researchers and participants. For the researchers these were manifest in feelings of empathy, anger at the way the person was being treated at work, frustration as they were still struggling despite working really hard in more than one job and suffering with poverty, shame and ill-health. Yet despite these unpleasant experiences, we agree with Holland (2007:208) that researchers need to value the extra power in understanding, analysis and interpretation that mutual emotions experienced in the field can bring to the research.

To conclude, we hope that the experiences we portray in this chapter help future researchers aiming to recruit ‘hard to reach’ groups. We also highlight the importance of emotions experienced in the field, which need to be drawn into analysis and interpretation in order to help us fully understand and portray the lives of other people.

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ANNOTATED FURTHER READING

1. Valerio et al (2016) referenced above.

Despite being a medical sciences research paper, this was extremely useful in presenting strategies for improved sampling through community groups, use of media and social marketing, as well as the use of an advisory board which they argue achieves a higher attendance rate and greater representation from 'hard to reach' participants.

2. Holland, J. (2007) referenced above

A very useful paper in helping to understand how emotions have been used in social science research to unearth the ways that emotions are implicated in the research process.

3. MacDonald et al. (2013) referenced above

A fascinating account of the practicalities and realities of researching hard to reach groups.

